

news release

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FARMERS INSURANCE KICKS OFF “BE A HERO FOR BABIES DAY” IN ARIZONA *Farmers Insurance employee recalls the pain of having a premature baby*

PHOENIX, AZ., JUNE 22, 2009 -- Joey Alexander Romano was born February 1, 2009 at just 29 weeks gestation weighing 1 pound 12 ounces. This “miracle baby,” as parents George and Debbie Romano like to refer to him, spent 3 months of his life in the NICU and miraculously shocked the medical community as he began to grow and become healthy.

Baby Joey’s journey into this world was a difficult one. His parents, filled with joy to know they were expecting, prepared for the journey a 9-month pregnancy would take them on. Tracking his progress and the progress of Debbie’s experience was something they looked forward to; however, an unexpected turn of events prevented that from happening.

A short time into her pregnancy, Debbie found herself at the hospital for routine monitoring when they noticed the baby’s heart had dropped. Unknowingly suffering from severe Intrauterine Growth Restriction (IUGR), a condition in which the fetus is smaller than expected for the number of weeks of pregnancy, at just 25 weeks Joey’s arrival was imminent.

“It was a very scary and confusing time for us,” said Debbie Romano. “This was my first pregnancy, and I didn’t know what to expect from that, let alone giving birth too soon.”

During his stay at the Phoenix Children’s Hospital Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), George and Debbie stayed by Joey’s side night and day. They shared in each others frustration and monitored their son’s progress, even when there was none to report. Often recalling his feelings of jealousy and envy as they watched soon-to-be parents come in for healthy deliveries, George Romano felt as if his family had been short-changed. “We were supposed to have that experience. I wanted to be the tired and emotional one...I wanted to take him home...it’s not fair.”

“It was a surreal time...it’s a tragedy, yet that crazy environment is what you begin to accept as normal,” said Debbie. “We became so accustomed to being there and watching as he was poked and prodded...tubes everywhere...we even learned to stimulate him when his heart would slow down or he would stop breathing.”

The stress of having a premature baby or a baby suffering from a defect can take its toll. Parents struggle not only to find out the science behind what is happening to their child, but with the unanswered “why me” questions. Debbie Romano recalls her many rides to and from the hospital with her husband as they prayed for his health – “We always had so much running through our minds. I remember asking George if we’d ever talk to each other in the car again.”

A newly married couple, the Romano’s had been married only 2 years before they became pregnant and Joey was born premature. “I think we got through this by having our friends and family by our side,” said Debbie. “We have an 11-year old daughter at home and we somehow needed to keep a sense of normalcy for her...we know many of the families who spent their nights in the NICU were completely alone...thankfully there are programs such as the March of Dimes NICU Family Support program that provides comfort to those who are going through what we did.”

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As Joey's condition slowly improved, the Romano family began to see the light at the end of the tunnel. "He was no longer the size of 4 sticks of butter, he was 6 and then 8," said George. The tiniest of progress in Joey's health meant he was that much closer to coming home.

On April 10, 2008, Joey was finally able to take his first car ride, feel the warm Arizona air on his skin and sleep in the comfort of his own home. "There was something about getting him home," said Debbie. "Yeah, he was still covered in tubes, but he was finally home and that made it easier to cope with."

Months went by and Joey became stronger. While he still suffers from a tiny hole in his heart, Joey is all smiles and full of playful energy – especially when his big sister walks into the room. "I'm so glad to have Joey home," said Alexandra Romano. "I didn't like having him so far away – I never knew I could love him so much, and I get to play with him all the time now!"

Doctors are unsure as to what potential developmental constraints Joey may have as he gets older. Weekly, Joey has a specialist who works with him on his motor development, speech and language skills. "We continue to be thrilled that our son is home, but it is still stressful to hear doctors say we are unsure of how he will progress," said George. "We know Joey, and we see his enthusiasm for life – we know there may be uncertainties, but we choose to live life to its fullest."

George Romano, who works for March of Dimes partner Farmers Insurance, participated in the 2009 March for Babies in Phoenix. "It was the first time I walked," said George. "I saw people with their t-shirts and photos of their very own miracle babies – I walked for Joey, and every step that I took reminded me of the crucial and lifesaving research performed by the March of Dimes."

Farmers, who will host their annual "Be a Hero for Babies" day across the country on July 22, encourages their employees and agents to host awareness activities that provide information on the programs and services offered by the March of Dimes. "I was a brand new employee of Farmers when my wife and I went through all of this," said George. "It's nice to know that my company looks out not only for me and my baby, but for babies everywhere."

Joey, now 16-months old weighing 20 pounds and close to 30 inches in length, is as active as ever playing with his sister and enjoying the endless amount of love offered by his parents and family. "He's still small when compared to other children his age," said Debbie. "But to us, his perfect."

ABOUT BE A HERO FOR BABIES:

For Farmers Insurance, being a national sponsor of March of Dimes March for Babies is part of fulfilling the "Farmers' Promise for Babies:" Helping Get Babies Back Where They Belong – Healthy and Strong. Farmers' commitment to the March of Dimes has been on-going for more than two decades and includes contributions of more than \$25 million. Farmers' headquarters is in Los Angeles. They do business in 41 states, providing Homeowners, Auto, Business, Life insurance and financial services to more than 10 million households through 18,000 employees and 15,500 agents. Farmers' has been serving America's families and businesses for more than 75 years. For more information, visit www.farmers.com.

ABOUT MARCH OF DIMES:

The March of Dimes is the leading nonprofit organization for pregnancy and baby health. With chapters nationwide and its premier event, March for Babies the March of Dimes works to improve the health of babies by preventing birth defects, premature birth and infant mortality. For the latest resources and information, visit marchofdimes.com or nacersano.org.

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George & Joey
Age: 2 months



Debbie & Joey
Age: 2 months



Alexandra & Joey
Age: 3 months



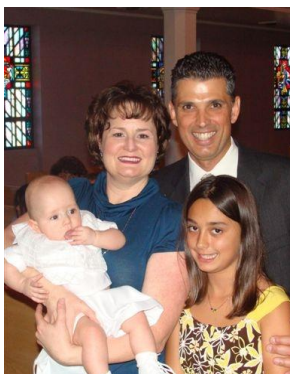
Joey's 1st Birthday



Joey's 1st Christmas



Joey at 16 Months



The Romano Family